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RIYADH, PLEASE PASS TO DHAHRAN; DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP

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TAGS: CMGT CVIS PGOV PREL SA PTER ASEC ABLD AMGT

SUBJECT: INTERNAL SAG RIVALRIES ON CLOSING PALESTINE STREET
DELAY RESUMPTION OF VISA SERVICES

REF: A. 05 JEDDAH 04869

¶B. JEDDAH 000347

Classified By: Tatiana C. Gfoeller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (S) SUMMARY: As part of his research for a SAG-commissioned report on improving the issuance of US visas to Saudi nationals, Nawaf Al Obeid, an advisor to Saudi Ambassador to the US Turki bin Feisal Al Saud, met with the Consul General and Conoff on May 17. The CG emphasized that though minor efforts to streamline the application process may prove fruitful, the only truly effective way to ease long visa wait times would be for the Saudi Government to close the section of Palestine Street fronting the Consulate, per the Ambassador's November request, thereby allowing the resumption of visa services. Al Obeid stated that though the decision on this rested with the King, certain members of the government opposed the street closure because it would show weakness in the face of American pressure. END SUMMARY

REPORT TO OFFER COSMETIC IMPROVEMENTS FOR VISA APPLICANTS

¶12. (S) On May 17, the Consul General and Conoff met with Nawaf Al Obeid, the energy and security advisor to SAG Ambassador to the US Prince Turki bin Feisal Al Saud, as part of his research for a SAG-commissioned report on streamlining the visa issuance process for Saudi nationals. According to Obeid, frustration at the suspension of non-immigrant visa services at Post (see reftel A) and long appointment wait times at Embassy Riyadh (now currently at 16 weeks) has led to numerous formal complaints being filed with the King and widespread media coverage disparaging the USG. Obeid's stated goal is to release a public report on the situation that will not only offer suggestions for making the visa application process more efficient but will dispassionately describe the circumstances to dispel public recriminations.

¶13. (S) Summarizing his meetings at Embassy Riyadh the previous week with representatives from the political and consular sections as well as from the Department of Homeland Security, Al Obeid made several informal and cosmetic suggestions for improving the visa issuance process there. He also acknowledged the importance of examining the visa issue in context and recognized the USG's "legitimate" concerns about visa reciprocity.

"THE TRAIN IS LEAVING THE STATION"

¶14. (S) The CG emphasized that the full resolution of the

visa issue would only occur after the SAG had closed the block of Palestine Street which fronts the Consulate compound, per the Ambassador's November 2005 request, and non-immigrant visa services in Jeddah were resumed. The CG noted the USG's continued frustration at the lack of movement and bilateral dialogue, despite the fact that should a bomb attack occur on the Consulate with visa services operating, Saudi casualties would mount into the hundreds. By closing the street, the Mission would be able to dramatically increase the number of visa appointments as well as ensure the protection of both its staff and the Saudi public. She said that the urgency of the security threat was highlighted by the May 12 shooting at the Consulate (see reftel B). (Note: Contrary to previous SAG accounts of a lone shooter, Obeid said the government was currently hunting for at least four accomplices involved in the attack.)

¶15. (S) She further explained that time was "running out" for the SAG to make a decision, given that the Department would likely re-allocate resources in the near future should visa services in Jeddah not resume. This would mean the permanent transfer of personnel as well as a renovation of the consular facility so it could be used more efficiently by other sections. The CG stated in plain terms that should this happen, it would be unlikely that the section would re-open soon. "The train is leaving the station," she said. Obeid agreed that the continued US-SAG dispute on the visa issue and the closing of the street only served to empower elements in the Kingdom that would welcome a rift in the bilateral relationship.

SAUDI INTRANSIGENCE TO SAVE FACE

¶16. (S) Obeid explained that the unwillingness of the SAG to address the street closure was based primarily on domestic political considerations and had "zero to do" with any inconvenience to Jeddawis of having to detour around the closed block. "Absolutely no one cares about that," Obeid said disdainfully. Instead, he said the SAG had to avoid the appearance of "caving in" to the USG in order to save face with its own constituency. Emphasizing that there was significant anti-Americanism in Saudi Arabia and Jeddah proper, he claimed that was the reason for the obstacles faced by the Consulate General in purchasing land for a new compound. "I understand that every time you are close to clinching a deal, when the seller realizes who you are, he withdraws his land."

¶17. (S) Obeid also hinted that a struggle for influence both within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the group closest to the King was at least somewhat responsible for the SAG's delay in responding to the Ambassador's request. In particular, he said that a group of "young and modern" princes were working to undermine the unpopular Assistant Minister for Consular Affairs. Similarly, Obeid remarked on rumors that the King's advisors were split between conservative elements opposed to compromise and more moderate voices. Before leaving, Conoff took Obeid on a brief tour of the consular section. Obeid was surprised by its considerable size and remarked several times that he had not realized how many interview windows would be available for visa applicants should the section reopen.

¶18. (S) COMMENT: Though the SAG is clearly frustrated by the public outcry at visa wait times, competing elements within the government have obscured the fact that only the Saudis can solve the problem. There seems to be little recognition that closing the section of Palestine Street adjacent to the Consulate and facilitating the search for land on which to build a new Consulate compound are the two most effective ways to resolve the issue. END COMMENT
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